

Naughty Bits

By Karen Green

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People kept asking me, "Are you going to buy *Lost Girls* for the collection?"

Good question.

Well, first, was it erotica or pornography? Erotica's not a problem. Academic libraries are chock full of the stuff, either because it was produced by well-known authors—like Anaïs Nin's *Delta of Venus* or Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*—or because it becomes an interesting subject for study in itself. Our online catalog lists 73 titles under the heading "Erotic literature"—and this is just the secondary scholarship on the stuff. I mean, erotica is...tasteful, right?

Then there's pornography. Some of what we have in our collections might, at certain times in American literary history, have been defined as pornography (I'm looking at YOU, *Ulysses* and *Lady Chatterly's Lover*). Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart said in 1964 that he might not be able to define what constitutes pornography, "but I know it when I see it." But the benefit of print pornography is that in some ways it's only as pornographic as the reader's imagination allows it to be. Once you add in pictures, though, the dynamic changes. It's more...explicit, if you will.

I decided I had to see it for myself, so I went down to Jim Hanley's Universe and unblushingly bought a copy. I brought it home and read it all through in one go. For my

tastes, it was definitely pornography, in that the sexual activity got pretty boring after the first 15 minutes. But on the other hand, Neil Gaiman in his review of *Lost Girls* for *Publishers Weekly*, said "It succeeded for me wonderfully as a true graphic novel. If it failed for me, it was as smut. The book, at least in large black-and-white photocopy form, was not a one-handed read." Heh.

But what it was, besides being porn, and in addition to being a commentary on girlhood, on children's literature, on emotional relationships, on the passing of childhood, on the wonder and terror of newly-discovered sexuality, on war, on the birth of the Modern and the death of the *ancien regime*, on Edwardian erotic literature—and more—was an Alan Moore book. And if you're going to create a canon of comics/GN authors, then he's absolutely in it. Further, if you're going to collect the authors in that canon, then you have to collect their entire *oeuvre*. What's more, Melinda Gebbie's artwork was breath-taking: melding the gentle style of children's book illustration with Matisse-like Fauvism, the phantasmagoria of Beardsley's *Yellow Book* or Franz von Bayros, and more, ever-changing as it took its cues from the content of the tale.

So, it would go into the collection. But the decision-making didn't end there. Where in the collection would it go? Would I keep it in the open stacks, in the general collection of books that people can check out and take home? It's an expensive book for a graphic novel, though not for a scholarly work (now you know why all those starving grad students are starving), so that wasn't my concern. My concern was...well...what might happen to it.

Columbia University is a fine institution with an intelligent and upstanding student body and scholarly community, but not all of them have the same respect for books that, say, we librarians have. Our head of Collection Maintenance has STORIES, such as the ones about the two separate books that have come back with used condoms in them—and those weren't even erotica. If I was going to add *Lost Girls* to the collection, I wanted to make sure I wasn't going to have to check it every month to see if I'd need to replace it.



I had faced a similar dilemma when I added *Tijuana bibles: art and wit in America's forbidden funnies, 1930s-1950s*. "Tijuana bible" was the term applied to small, brief, pornographic comics using well-known traditional comics characters, film stars, politicians, what-have-you. They're eight pages packed full of social commentary and observation, and an amazing find for cultural historians. I just had to add this book to the collection, but how could I protect it? I surely didn't want it in our open stacks—which, though "open," are dark and full of hidden places—so I decided to send it to our Offsite storage facility, out of which it could be paged directly from its online catalog record.

I didn't think that was safe enough for *Lost Girls*, though. Offsite prevents books from being stolen, and associates a borrower's name with the book, but the book can still leave the premises, where anything could happen to it. I could specify that it go to Offsite and, if paged, be restricted to in-library use, but I was still afraid that it would be vulnerable. I talked to our Rare Books librarian—you remember her, the Silver Surfer fan?—and she agreed to place it in her collection. Now it can be read, but in a strictly supervised and well-lit research reading room.

Buxom heroines and occasional sexual scenes are hardly new to the comics world. But these two titles offer something far earthier and more visceral than what's been seen previously (you have no idea what I went through trying to find appropriate images for this column!). I don't have to worry about book challenges, the way public libraries do, but I do have to gauge appropriateness as well as protect the collection itself. I feel pretty good about the decisions I reached on these two titles. What do you think?

Dagwood in All in a day's work

Author unknown

Tijuana bibles: art and wit in America's forbidden funnies, 1930s-1950s

New York: Simon & Schuster Editions, 1997

Dorothy gets carried away during the tornado, Vol.1, chap.7, p.6

Alan Moore, Melinda Gebbie

Lost girls

Atlanta: Top Shelf Productions, 2006

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